General Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

M/M
Other

ULTRAKILL (Video Game)

Gabriel/V1 (ULTRAKILL)

Gabriel (ULTRAKILL)
V1 (ULTRAKILL)

Angels is bugs
no specific setting
no specific time
gabriel is some kind of bug or perhaps shramp au
English ← Previous Work Part 4 of Angels is Bugs Next Work →

Call and Response

LuxLightly

Summary:

Gabriel's constant grooming and preening of V1 is getting annoying for the Machine yet Gabriel can't help feeling like the sentiment he's compelled to express through it is not being returned.

If only he could figure out what that even was.

Notes:

(See the end of the work for notes (#work_endnotes) .)

Things changed after Gabriel's second molt. For the better, by and large. He ate and slept more frequently, now, which seemed to do wonders for his energy and mood, though there were some bumps in the road.

He'd hit another moral barrier of sorts when it came time to eat something he himself had killed.

It had seemed fine. Gabriel had been enthusiastic in their first hunt together. He'd singled off one of the last filth and, with a deft slash from Splendor and Justice, sliced it in thirds.

V1 had felt giddy. Gabriel enjoyed fighting, of course, but that animal side of him that showed itself during their duels rarely made any appearance when he fought anything else.

He killed husks and demons with a somber, detached efficiency, like a reluctant executioner. There was little joy in that bloodshed for him, even when it proved more of a challenge. V1 didn't really understand why it should be so different to him, but clearly it was.

It was all wrapped up in shame. That much was obvious. Millennia of rules Gabriel's mind was supposed to follow every single second, like programming, except it went against the way his mind and body actually worked. Yet, for

“failing” at it, he could be considered worthy of death or worse.

As far as V1 was concerned, it made about as much sense as trying to shame a blender into working like a toaster, then condemning it to death when it cut up your bread instead of toasting it.

Most of the time, it seemed like Gabriel felt the same, now, but sometimes V1 could tell there was a part of him that still believed that his failure to adhere to the strictures of Heaven made him deserving of any punishment they could see fit to put on him. That the joys he found in his new freedom were, at some level, only ever a consolation for the perfection which he'd failed to achieve.

V1 felt so happy every time he seemed to shed another layer of that shame and bring that radiant, fiery life within him closer to the surface.

It had thought this was another such time. The idea of hunting with Gabriel beside it, fighting for more than a grim sense of accomplished duty, to experience the rush of feeding off of one's own kill, had been so exhilarating.

It had wanted him to know that feeling, wanted to share it with him.

Gabriel had already been salivating when he fell upon the trifurcated filth corpse and unhooked his mandibles, spreading them wide.

V1 still didn't really understand what changed.

His whole demeanor shifted, without warning. He'd snapped his jaws sealed again and nearly jumped back to his feet, backing away from the body as if it terrified him. Suddenly he'd not been able to be there, anymore. He'd practically run from the site of the battle.

He’d been sitting against a pillar when V1 caught up with him.

“It had been someone, you know?” he'd said. His voice had had that distant sort of quality to it that V1 knew meant he was talking more to himself than to it. “Someone who…who had lived. Loved, maybe. Someone with hopes and dreams and sorrows.”

V1 would have argued that the filth itself had never been any of those things. Maybe the soul that had manifested into it when it was brought to Hell had, but the filth had only ever been a husk. A hollow shell formed from something that had once been a human soul. Even if it had the means to do so, however, V1 would not have voiced this. When Gabriel spoke like that, it was because he needed to work through something, not to argue semantics.

He'd shaken his head, sadly.

“For a moment, when I was…I was about to--” He’d seemed unable to bring himself to say it. “For a moment, all I saw it as was food.”

He'd pulled his knees to his chest.

“I don't like that. Don't like…don't like how easy it was. To see it that way.”

He'd not eaten anything else for nearly a week after that.

V1 didn't understand why he wouldn't want something to be easy. It wasn't sure if it was just because he'd been taught that things that felt easy or natural were bad or some other, more complicated and personal reason.

Everything was eaten by something, eventually, even if it was just microbes decomposing a corpse. Why should it be shameful to see a source of fuel for what it was? Why try to force personification back onto something just for the sake of feeling bad about it?

V1 had to accept that, as a machine built to feed off of human blood, it simply might never be able to grasp exactly what troubled Gabriel so much about feeding on what had once been something approaching human.

It thought back to the first night they'd slept side by side, when it had woken up to critical fuel levels and turned on Gabriel in a blood starved frenzy. It had been so lost in its bloodlust, Gabriel had been nothing more than food to it, then, too.

…Maybe, in that way, it could begin to understand the source of the discomfort. Even if Gabriel was dead, it supposed it would not want to look at his corpse and see only a source of fuel.

Its point stood, however, that a filth was a far cry from a human being and an even farther cry from Gabriel. The moral dilemma was needless.

It didn't mind hunting for him, however, once he could finally be convinced to let it, again. He seemed to appreciate the act of receiving those small tributes on a level too deep and strong for it to be something he'd ever been allowed to even think about, nevermind understand or indulge in. V1 liked encouraging those feelings in him whenever possible. It seemed to scratch a similar itch within itself, as well. There was a social creature, still, somewhere deep in the dna of its lab grown flesh, it seemed, and it enjoyed the act of providing for something it cared for.

Getting to watch Gabriel eat was a pleasant bonus. His mouth was a fascinating and complex system of many different moving parts working in tandem that was nearly hypnotizing to watch. As well as exquisite to feel, under the right circumstances. Though that was somewhat wherein the downside to Gabriel's exploration of his own instincts and desires lay.

The grooming.

Gabriel's fastidious grooming of V1 with his mouthparts was not an inherently bad thing, quite the contrary. V1 deeply enjoyed it. All those complex little ridges and feelers scraping and nibbling across its plating and wires was interesting at worst, ecstacy at best.

But it had just gotten to be so *constant.*

Most of the changes to Gabriel's behavior that happened in the pre-molt stages, like his nearly smothering clinginess and languid lethargy, had gone back to normal after the shed itself, but the grooming had only seemed to grow more frequent. Every quiet moment they had, it seemed as though Gabriel's mouth would be trailing along its collar or its bezel or the segments of its fingers.

Even now, in its sleep mode, it could almost feel the phantom touches against its plating.

Wait a second…

V1 dragged itself out of sleep mode and cracked the lens of its optic open to see Gabriel fully engrossed in grooming its shoulder joint.

It stared for a few moments and it was clear Gabriel was too focused on his task to notice it was watching him.

With a quick whirring of its fans, V1 made a sound akin to clearing its throat to get his attention.

"Ah!" Gabriel yelped, pulling away from where V1 sat with its back against a wall.

He quickly snapped his mandibles closed.

"Forgive me," he said, sounding sheepish. "I didn't think…uh…I thought…maybe it wouldn't wake you."

V1 lowered the upper lid of its optic halfway, giving Gabriel the equivalent of a deadpan stare. It could see the way his hands fidgeted and his jaw worked ever so slightly back and forth, even sealed shut the way it was, the desire to keep grooming turning to a restless energy.

With a buzzing sound not unlike a sigh, V1 leaned its head to the side in invitation and acceptance.

“Ah! Thank you,” Gabriel breathed, relief clear in his voice.

He opened his jaws again and resumed grooming along V1’s neckline, making a few pleased clicking sounds as he did so.

“I *am* sorry, “ he said, after a few moments of grooming. “I know I’ve been a bit…overbearing. I don't know what's gotten into me, lately. It just feels so *nice* . Not like…you know, *that* kind of ‘nice’, just…pleasant.”

His grooming slowed as he seemed to contemplate it.

“It just feels like…like I was supposed to be doing this my whole life and just never knew it…”

Pulling away but not yet closing his jaws entirely, he looked away, as if trying to recall something.

“It feels affectionate. A call and response sort of thing. Like little ways of saying--...” Gabriel paused for just a moment. “...I don't know.”

He shrugged, helplessly.

“Back when He first made us, the Father fashioned His angels very similarly to the creatures He made most often and with the most precision: things like insects and crustaceans,” he said. “Then…when He began to plan His most precious experiment, humanity, He reshaped us to better fit their likeness to better serve as His messengers to them. I barely remember the time before I had the form I do now but I can't help but feel that things got lost along the way. Things we should never have forgotten.”

He sighed, grasping at the air with his hands as if it would help him grasp the concepts that eluded him.

“The angels of Heaven don't do this. They don't know that they can. That they *should* . I feel that so strongly. This is a part of us we were never meant to give up. A ritual of closeness we should have always known, but never did. And, most likely, they now never will. I'll never know, either way.”

It was clear Gabriel's thoughts still lingered often on the fate of Heaven. He felt a kinship with the angels there that V1 had never felt with any of the other machines, not even V2.

It wasn't sure if it pitied him for it or envied him.

In any case, it felt for him, now. Clearly he was suffering with whatever was causing these strange impulses.

Gabriel seemed to notice V1’s concern. He'd grown shockingly good at reading it, just in the relatively short time they'd known each other. To be fair, if his own nearly featureless visage was anything to go off of, he'd had a lot of practice reading emotion from faces with little to no ability to emote.

“I'm alright. You go back to sleep. I won't wake you again until it's your shift, this time. I promise.”

V1 narrowed its optic, skeptical of Gabriel's insistence that he was fine, but relented to agree that it was hardly the time for trying to untangle that mess of complex emotions.

It leaned back against the wall and closed its eye, again.

Gabriel watched as V1 drifted back into what served for sleep for a machine.

The urge to begin grooming again rose up within him but he forced it back down.

A feeling like bitter disappointment settled in the place of the thwarted urge.

Somewhere, deep in his memories, back towards the beginning of all creation, when time and existence were vague concepts yet to be fully defined, when even his normally perfect recollection became fuzzy and unclear, he recalled nibbling tiny jaws against a chin far larger than his own and receiving gentle grooming in return.

Hundreds of gentle touches exchanged back and forth, like a repeating chorus of the same idea:

"I love you, I love you, I love you."

Gabriel felt his face heat up in embarrassment.

Was that really why he felt so disappointed, so thwarted, when he had to stop grooming V1? Was that the response his repeated calls weren't receiving, driving him to be ever more insistent?

Love was never something complicated to Gabriel before. He was an angel. It was his nature to love all of the Lord's creations. To love His creations was to love Him and Gabriel was made to love his Father with every fiber of his being.

Expressing such an idea had always been effortless, before. How could it not be? Expressing love for the Father and all that He had made could be nothing but entirely natural to him. He'd said it thousand, thousand times, in a thousand, thousand ways.

It should be the same, now. Why would it be any different to look the machine in its single, golden eye, burning like the sun just before sunset, and say--

…

It was different.

He knew that the way he felt about V1 was not the abstract, detached kind of love he'd felt towards all of his Father's creations. He knew it was something more personal, more intense.

He didn't love V1 as an extension of his love for the Father. Whatever it was he felt towards the machine, it was an emotion only for himself. Something held close to his heart, meant to be shared with no one else, not even the God he'd once offered up every bit of his heart to.

But did that make it a different kind of love? Was it still love at all? Was it… *romantic* love? The kind humans wrote so many stories and songs about? He'd never really considered the difference before. It was clear their relationship was more than physical, more than allies or friends. They certainly fit the description of romantic partners as far as they were put forth by human standards.

But what did that even mean, to something like himself? To something like V1? They were both far from human.

He didn't know.

All he knew is that when he ran his mouth along the bottom of V1's "chin", the lack of an echoed gesture left a hollow, empty feeling in his chest he couldn't shake.

Gabriel did not need to rouse V1, when its turn to keep watch came around. It had the ability to preset exactly how long it would be in sleep mode, if it chose.

That was helpful enough, since Gabriel was too distracted to remember. H e was engrossed in examining his wings and, more specifically, the layers of thin, feather-like scales that covered them. It helped satisfy the urge to groom without bothering V1.

It had been too long since he'd properly preened them; broken and bent scales dotted the length of his wings, causing whole patches to become irritated and begin shedding.

He held his wing in a hand and pulled a few torn scales on the tips out with the other. He could reach these easily enough, but the ones near to where his wings connected to his back would be difficult if not impossible for him to reach.

He looked up as he heard V1 make an inquisitive noise, realizing it was watching him.

“Oh, is it time to change watch, already?” he asked. “Forgive me. I was preoccupied.”

V1 leaned over to inspect what he was doing, making another questioning whirring noise with its fans. It pointed to the scales in Gabriel's hand.

Gabriel released his wing.

“Just dealing with a bit of molting,” he said, then hastily clarified, holding his hands up, placatingly, as V1 jolted in alarm.

“Not that kind of molting!” he assured, and V1 relaxed.

“‘Molting’ is a catch-all term for any kind of shedding,” he continued. “When I shed my armor, my ‘cuticle’, that process is known as ‘ecdysis’. This is simply shedding some damaged wing scales.”

He held up a scale, twisting it back and forth to show its iridescence, shifting between blue and gold as the light hit it at different angles.

“They're a bit like the feathers of a bird, I suppose, in function, but more chitinous and without any blood flow like the scales of a butterfly.”

V1 stared in apparent wonder, reaching out to touch the scale, only for it to fade into nothingness like a dying ember.

It blinked, confused.

“My wings aren't flesh. They're more like…a solidified light, like my halo. That's why I don't shed them along with my armor. They're a part of my body but also not,” Gabriel explained. “I can summon and dismiss them at will, but their form is maintained each time. So, if I injure my wing, I can't just dispel and reform it to fix it, it would remain injured until it healed.”

He held up the other scales he'd pulled from his wing, which were similarly beginning to fade. Letting them drop from his hand, they floated downwards, catching the light before disappearing, twinkling out of existence like the sparks of a sparkler.

“Detached from the rest of my form, they cannot maintain their shape and dissipate. Normally they shed on their own in flight, that's what causes that sort of shimmering trail when an angel flies. However, a broken or bent one can get stuck and trap others with it until they all fall out at once, which causes bare patches of wing and, if it gets bad enough, can interfere with flight until they regrow properly”

V1 looked over Gabriel's wings, seeming to note a number of small, bare patches littering their surface.

It narrowed its eye at him.

Gabriel shrugged, sheepishly.

“I, uh, haven't really been keeping up with proper wing maintenance…”

V1 folded its arms, disapprovingly.

“In my defense, it's not particularly easy to reach all of my scales myself!” Gabriel said. “In Paradise, one could have their wings preened by another angel, though it's rarer to need to, there. They only get stuck if they get damaged or sullied, which doesn't happen often in Paradise.”

V1 narrowed its optic again, but thoughtfully, instead of accusatory, seeming to contemplate something.

It looked to him and locked its top hands together, clasping the fingers together like a chain link. A bit of their own makeshift sign.

It tilted its head at him.

“Help?” Gabriel asked, recognizing the gesture. “You want to help? I…suppose it couldn't hurt. Do you know anything about wing care?”

V1 looked back at its own wings, then to Gabriel and gave a “so-so” gesture.

“Only wings of a very different nature,” Gabriel said.

V1 nodded.

“Well, I suppose it doesn't matter if they're all properly aligned and lying flat, as long as any damaged ones are removed,” Gabriel said. “Do you feel confident you could tell which those are?”

V1 nodded.

Gabriel took a deep breath.

“Alright. No harm in trying, then.”

He turned away from V1 and gently extended his wings.

Why did he feel so nervous, all the sudden? It's not as if V1 was incapable of delicacy. Even if it weren't, there was little damage it could realistically do before Gabriel simply dismissed his wings.

It wasn't any risk that made him nervous, then.

Was it simply the intimacy of it? Being preened was certainly not something only performed by partners. It was a common social bonding activity.

And yet, as with all things, familiar rituals felt foreign and new when performed with V1. Everything took on deeper meaning through sharing it with the Machine and through, in a way, passing it down to this new thing he himself had become, physically unchanged and yet so unrecognizable to the angel he'd been before.

V1 seemed to notice his nerves and lay a hand against his wing, pausing to confirm he was comfortable before proceeding.

“I'm alright,” Gabriel assured. “You won't hurt me.”

He'd meant to say that V1 was unlikely to be able to do any damage to him, even if it spectacularly failed in its attempts to help. Yet the words rang truer as they were said than he'd even intended.

Not an assurance that he would not be hurt, but rather an affirmation of trust.

He didn't correct himself.

V1 began by running its fingers along his wings, feeling out the flow of the scales.

Gabriel suppressed a shudder. The feeling of hands beside his own stroking his wings again, after so much time, spoke to the lonely, neglected thing in him that craved these feelings of touch and closeness in a way that took him, every time, by surprise.

As V1 began carding its fingers through the scales themselves, Gabriel's shudder could not be suppressed, nor the sharp intake of breath.

“It's fine!” he assured, before V1 had even had the chance to pull away. “It's good. Very good. It's just…been a very long time. It took me by surprise.”

Gabriel knew V1 needed no translation for his clumsy attempts at expressing his feelings. It knew the words that would be strangled in his throat if he tried to give them breath:

“Once again, you've woken a hunger in me I'd not known I had, or had long forgotten. Only in its fulfillment do I recognize the extent of its absence.”

Shame mangled and trapped his words as surely as V1’s haphazardly constructed voice box, but they'd both learned to understand the unspoken as well as the spoken.

V1's hands returned to their good work, running along his wings until they caught on damaged scales and pulled them from the wing with a gentle precision. Glimmering scales soon littered the ground, shimmering as they faded out of existence.

Gabriel hummed, contentedly, noticing as a few chirping noises accompanied the sound. He pushed away any feelings of shame that tried to bubble up at the normally “uncouth” noises.

V1 liked them. What did it matter if anyone else didn't?

The Machine was methodical but gentle and yet a sort of restlessness stirred in Gabriel despite the calm pleasantness of the sensation.

A buzzing desire in him he recognized all too well welled up until it seemed to vibrate beneath his skin, causing him to nearly twitch beneath V1’s touch.

At last, he could take it no more and turned sharply around to face V1, who startled, pulling its hands quickly away, worried it might have hurt him.

Gabriel raised a hand and cupped the side of the Machine’s head, tenderly.

“V1, I need-- May I?”

V1 blinked in apparent confusion before understanding seemed to cross its features and it nodded.

Gabriel wordlessly opened his mandibles and began to groom V1's bezel, not lowering his hand from where it held V1's “cheek”. He shifted his position to sit facing it.

The yearning in him that the action had begun to increasingly stir in him had no time to grow into a thwarted frustration, this time, however, for, no sooner had he started than did V1 wrap two of its arms around him and begin running its fingers through his scales again.

The chirp Gabriel let out was loud and almost melodious, too specific for a random puff of air through his spiracles and too familiar to his ear, though he could not recall its source.

The way his heart swelled as V1's ministrations increased in response made it undeniable there was meaning in the sound his body remembered, even if he could not, and that, thank whatever power might still exist to sway fate in this abandoned universe, V1 seemed to understand perfectly.

He raised his other hand to the other side of V1's face, pressing his mouth harder against its metal plating, his grooming growing more intense.

He thought to say it, then.

He should say it. If not now, when?

As V1 raised one of its hands to his own cheek, and another to grip his shoulder, its optic sliding closed, he realized, with a small huff of laughter, he already had. And it had already been reciprocated.

A call and response finally answered by gesture that could hold no less meaning, no less passion, than a kiss, even one so different from those of the beings they'd both been made to resemble.

He made the chirping sound again as they passed the feeling back and forth between each other without need for a single word.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

Notes:

I've had this written for probably months now but just keep forgetting to post it!

I had the idea of Gabriel having butterfly scales instead of feathers on his wings since I first came up with the AU and always intended to do a little ficlet about it it took a while for a decent idea for a story to put it in to form.

I watched a video on termites grooming for research and one of the big things social grooming insects do is a behavior called "begging", where they groom underneath the sort of "chin" area of another insect to ask for something like food or, often, to be groomed in return. Gabriel doesn't realize this, but that's why he has been obsessively focusing on grooming V1's chin bezel area and why he keeps getting frustrated. He's asking for a return gesture of affection and receiving none. When V1 preens his wings in return, he finally feels the call has been answered. Luckily V1 is better at picking up on that kind of thing than he is.

The little chirp he makes at the end is supposed to be like a cicada call. Now, pretty much all insects make mating/communication calls with their wings or bodies in some way, not by forcing air out their spiracles, but Gabriel is just a very special bug.

In many ways, Gabriel is still worried about defining and participating in a relationship by some arbitrary, generally human, standards. A kiss being a pressing of mouths or love confessions being words is all arbitrary. In the end, these gestures and expressions can be anything, as long as they are understood. At the core, regardless of their form, their function is the same: a call and response.

Series this work belongs to:

- ← Previous Work (http://archiveofourown.org/works/53595460) Part 4 of Angels is Bugs (http://archiveofourown.org/series/3953374) Next Work → (http://archiveofourown.org/works/64459264)

Close (#)